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A Serbian Ghost Town in Need of Recovery

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UXO and landmines litter the villages.

Photo c/o CARE/Jacob Holdt

A Serbian Ghost Town in Need of Recovery

■ by Sinisa Malesevic, UNA/USA

All sorts of people are hoping for the demining and reconstruction of Dropci, a "Serb village" approximately 45 kilometers from the municipality of Bihac in Unsko-Sanski Canton, located in the Muslim-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This area was strategically important during the war, and much was done to protect it, which means there are plenty of mine fields. The few hundred people who lived here before the war (1992-1995) have all left.

Among those cheering for Dropci's recovery is Amir Memic, who lives in Kulen Vakuf, a Muslim village close to Dropci, and who teaches in a primary school nearby. One of his reasons is practical: "If Dropci is reconstructed," he says, "we could use its system of power lines to ensure a steady supply of electricity to other villages as well." Memic is also hoping that once conditions improve in Dropci, Serb families will return to the village. "The war is over and we can live together now," he says, "but we cannot know that before we give it a try."

"We suggested this location for mine clearance because we believe that people would return," advises Izet Ismirevic, who heads the Bihac Civil Defense office. In fact, Ismirevic adds, "people who lived here have contacted us already and say that all they want is to come back."

Ismirevic says that another reason why Dropci is a good candidate for demining and reconstruction is that "the project itself is not so big, so in a relatively short period of time we would achieve a lot. And the municipal authorities could help a lot by reconstructing some of the facilities that were destroyed." What the local government can't deal with, however, are minefields. "Our municipality has no demining capacity to carry out such a task," notes Ismirevic, "and the economy is not strong enough to support the operation. We need help in demining, and we'll find the way to do the rest." "The rest" includes restoring the electric power lines destroyed during the war and building a new water supply system.

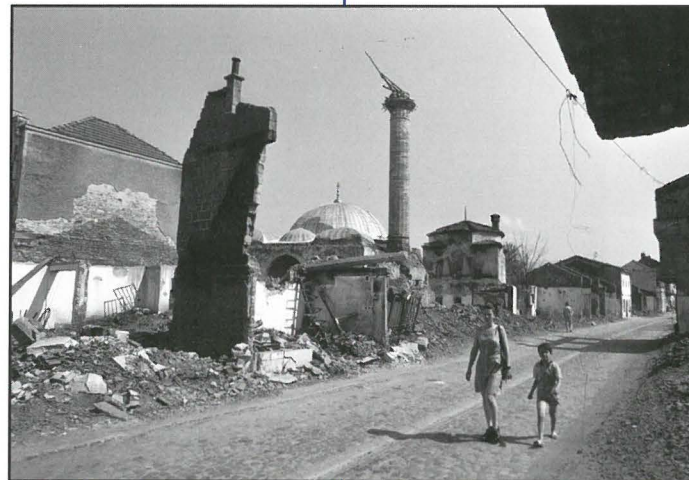
Clearing the mine fields would help the overall

economic situation too. "Since industry is not very developed here," Ismirevic points out, "most people earn their income from agriculture. Even those who work in government agencies or private companies, where the average salary is very low, have to grow things for their own consumption. Most families have cows or chickens or pigs, and all of them need fields – some for feeding cattle, some for plowing and growing things." Right now, though, there is no telling which of these fields is mined.

The Dropci area has very few mines of the home-made variety; most of the devices placed here are of Yugoslav manufacture, often PMR-2A and PMA-3 anti-personnel mines, designed to injure or kill. One man died from a landmine injury on a visit to the village to see his house. No one has visited since.

"It is actually good that people are afraid," says schoolteacher Memic, "because while they are afraid, nobody goes there and nobody gets hurt." He and the municipal authorities now have a chance to prepare a proper mine awareness program for children as well as for adults. "I expect we'll have some difficulties with the latter group," Memic says, "because they're apt to think they already know enough, and they often don't have time for the classes." The situation with children is different, he notes, since most of these classes are held during school hours, and the youngsters tend to like the mine awareness classes.

"We talked about this with mine awareness personnel of the mine action center," says Memic, "and they have promised us support and help. They'll begin by sending their instructors," he notes. "Once it gets going, I'm sure it will be fine!" ■



This Mosque and its surrounding houses were destroyed by the bombardments.

Photo c/o ICRC/Boris Heger